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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the teacher should be understood as a gatekeeper for curriculum and instruction in social studies, and that gatekeeping is a product of the frame of reference the teacher brings to it. The teacher plays the primary structuring role in the social studies classroom and, regardless of the official curriculum, constructs the curriculum that is actually provided in the classroom. As the curricular-instructional gatekeeper, the teacher makes the crucial decisions concerning content, sequence, and instructional strategy that determine the social studies experiences of students. The criteria the teacher employs to determine interpretations and uses of a curriculum are a product of his or her frame of reference. Curricular-instructional gatekeeping is a decision-making process often based on unexamined assumptions and conventions, that is, they are not conscious decisions. Though research relevant to gatekeeping is disparate and sketchy, some conclusions can be drawn and areas in need of research identified. Several studies illustrate specific aspects of gatekeeping by teachers in three domains: (1) the meaning of social studies, (2) planning for social studies, and (3) instruction in social studies. Teachers tend to substitute their own meanings of critical thinking in social studies for that intended by the curriculum developers. There is a general neglect of continuity of lessons by social studies teachers. Though social studies curricula are textbook-based, the instruction is teacher-dominated, therefore there is much variation in gatekeeping from teacher to teacher. It is important to raise the consciousness of teachers about their gatekeeping. (AS)

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Aspiration and Practice: Teacher as Curricular-Instructional Gatekeeper in Social Studies*

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There is longstanding concern in the social studies literature that the goals of knowing, thinking, valuing, and citizen action identified by theorists and researchers usually have not been adopted by teachers. Rather, teachers have taught through recitation -- whether mechanical catechism or more open and free-flowing discussion (Hertzberg, 1981, p. 168) -- a curriculum dominated by facts and loosely associated skills. (Goodlad, 1984, pp. 210-213) One reason for this gulf between aspiration and practice is that reformers attempting to change curriculum and instruction have not sufficiently heeded the realities of schools. According to Hazel Hertzberg (1981), the social studies reform efforts that have actually affected what happens in classrooms have incorporated not only new curriculum but also concern for "school and classroom realities." (pp. 165-167) These "realities" include teachers' approaches to social studies curriculum and instructional arrangements. The aim of this paper is to examine the teacher as a central reality in the determination of classroom curriculum.

In their overview of the comprehensive National Science Foundation (NSF) investigations of social studies, James P. Shaver, O. L. Davis, Jr., and Suzanne W. Helburn (1980) observed that:

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> The teachers' beliefs about schooling, his or her knowledge of the subject area and of available materials and techniques, how he or she decides to put these together for the classroom--out of that process of reflection and personal inclination comes the day by day classroom experiences of students. This is not to say that social studies classes are not affected by factors such as the characteristics of the students enrolled, but only to emphasize that the teacher plays the primary structuring role. (p. 5)

The operational curriculum--the curriculum that is actually provided in the classroom--is, on a daily basis, constructed by the teacher. Of particular concern in this paper is that the teacher makes the crucial decisions concerning content, sequence, and instructional strategy that determine the social studies experiences of students.

Research on both teaching (Clark & Peterson, 1986) and curriculum (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) has documented that what teachers believe about society, learning, student characteristics, curriculum, and instruction influences the curriculum they provide for their students. Moreover, the official curriculum (e.g., textbooks, curriculum guides) has the "potential" for many interpretations and uses. (Ben-Peretz, 1975) The criteria the teacher employs to determine interpretations and uses of a curriculum are a product of his or her frame of reference. Writing in the 1930s, Charles A. Beard observed:

> Every human being brought up in society inevitably has in mind a frame of social knowledge, ideas, and ideals--a more or less definite pattern of things deemed necessary, things deemed possible, and things deemed desirable; and to this frame or pattern, his thought and action will be more or less consciously referred. This frame may be large or small; it may embrace an immense store of knowledge or little knowledge; it may be well organized with respect to categories of social thought or confused and blurred in organization; and the ideal element in it may represent the highest or lowest aspirations of mankind. But frame there is in every human mind. ...Since all things known cannot be placed before children in the school room, there must and will be, inevitably, a selection, and the selection will be made with reference to some frame of knowledge and values, more or less consciously established in the mind of the selector. (1934, p. 182)[1]

In the remainder of this paper, I shall review the frames of reference teachers bring to social studies curriculum and instruction. More particularly, I shall argue that teachers are curricular-instructional gatekeepers[2]: that is, they are normally the primary determinant of content, sequence and instructional strategy. In other words, curricular-instructional gatekeeping is a decision-making process governed by the elements of the teacher's frame of reference.

The Importance of Curricular Gatekeeping

Curricular-instructional gatekeeping (hereafter gatekeeping) is educationally important because it determines both what content and experiences students have access to and the nature of that content and those experiences. Gatekeeping is a pervasive part of the work of teachers. Before, during and after instruction, teachers must act on gatekeeping questions: "Should I use a worksheet or a writing assignment as the culminating activity in the South America unit?" "Will my students be able to interpret this map of the Oregon Trail if I don't first review scale and legend?" "Should I ignore Jill's curiosity about the circumstances surrounding Lincoln's assassination so that I can introduce the unit on Reconstruction?" "Did the students' poor responses to the homework assignment mean that I should go over the material again in class tomorrow?"

Although all teachers act as gatekeepers, this does not necessarily mean that they are consciously weighing alternate courses of action or evaluating their assumptions. (Parker, 1984) Indeed, as shall be discussed below, gatekeeping is often based on unexamined assumptions and convention. John Dewey (1964) spoke to this very matter when he condemned "an education that is conducted blindly under the control of customs and traditions that have not been examined or in response to immediate social pressures." (p. 17) Nevertheless, whether well-grounded or by default, gatekeeping appears to be the single most important determinant of students' experiences in social studies classrooms. (Shaver, Davis, & Helburn, 1980)

The research reviewed in this paper is drawn from a variety of sources. Research relevant to gatekeeping is both disparate and sketchy. For example, Shaver (1987) noted that, despite the centrality of teachers' beliefs about

the meaning of social studies, little research has been aimed at identifying them. (p. 114) Moreover, much of the research evidence relevant to gatekeeping was gathered for other purposes. Nonetheless, there is a sufficient research base concerning teachers' criteria for choosing content, sequence, and instructional strategy to draw some conclusions and to identify needed areas of research.

In the remainder of this paper, I shall discuss some cases of the criteria social studies teachers employ in three domains of gatekeeping: (1) the meaning of social studies, (2) planning for social studies, and (3) instruction in social studies. Plainly, in a brief paper, only a limited number of cases can be included. Each study included was selected because it is particularly informative concerning a specific aspect of gatekeeping. Nevertheless, the studies appear consistent with the findings of larger studies with nationally-representative samples in which gatekeeping concerns were only one of many issues addressed. (e.g., Goodlad, 1984; Shaver, Davis & Helburn, 1980)

Gatekeeping and the Meaning of Social Studies

Among professors of social studies education and curriculum specialists, there is no general agreement concerning the meaning of social studies. (see, e.g., Bragaw, 1986, pp. 484-485) Although the goal of citizenship education underlies most social studies rationales, the meanings assigned to citizenship are also varied. What is clear is that social studies and citizenship are defined by teachers in ways that are divergent from how social studies professors and curriculum specialists define them. According to Shaver, Davis, and Helburn (1980), social studies teachers define social studies as textbook content, largely drawn from history, government and geography.

Mastery of factual textbook content, teachers believe, will prepare students for future academic success, ensure compliance with school norms, and inculcate society's values. (pp. 6-9) Order and compliance, for teachers, are part of the meaning of social studies.

The meaning teachers attribute to social studies is one aspect of their gatekeeping. For example, Sandra J. McKee (1988) studied seven 11th grade United States history teachers who taught in three high schools in a northeastern industrial city. The three teachers were involved in a project to foster critical thinking in social studies classes. In the project, critical thinking was defined as "essentially raising and pursuing questions about the ideas one encounters." (McKee, 1988, p. 445) The definition of critical thinking, however, ran counter to what the teachers believed about social studies. The teachers understood social studies classrooms as orderly places where student motivation is low. With these criteria in mind, the teachers preferred unambiguous facts to the open-ended conception of critical thinking. Consequently, teachers envisaged, planned, and taught the critical thinking skills curriculum in ways divergent from the intentions of the developers. In effect, the teachers substituted their meaning of critical thinking in social studies for the meaning intended by the developers.

Gatekeeping and Planning Social Studies

As Catherine Cornbleth (1985) observed, planning social studies curriculum is far from the value-neutral and technical undertaking often portrayed in the teacher education literature. Rather, how teachers plan is a product of their frame of reference. In this regard, Gail McCutcheon (1981) noted that, "in practice, the planning processes, the resultant curriculum, and influences on planning are not separate....[Rather] they flow into and

influence one another." (p. 47) Teachers' planning for social studies interacts, for example, with their beliefs about social studies classrooms and student motivation, socialization goals, and the preparation of students for the next grade-level.

Planning for social studies lessons again reveals the criteria teachers employ for gatekeeping. For example, no issue is more central to effective planning than the criterion of continuity of subject matter. (Dewey, 1963, pp. 73-88) In her study of 12 elementary teachers, however, McCutcheon (1981) concluded that, "for ten of the twelve teachers, the criterion of continuity of lessons did not appear to enter into their planning." (p. 54) A disjointed curriculum resulted. McCutcheon attributes the neglect of continuity by the teachers to two factors: (1) lack of training in planning, and (2) the probably unwarranted assumption that "textbooks incorporated some sort of continuity from one story, chapter, or skill to the next." (pp. 53-54)

Gatekeeping and Teaching Social Studies

Of course, the most visible manifestation of gatekeeping is teaching and the NSF studies remain the most comprehensive source on instruction in social studies. According to Shaver, Davis, and Helburn (1980), the textbook remains the central teaching tool, subject matter is drawn mostly from history, geography, and government, and large group, teacher-controlled question-and-answer recitation is the dominant instructional strategy. John Goodlad's (1984) findings appear to corroborate the NSF findings, as do more recent case studies of social studies classrooms. (e.g., Cornett, 1987; Hyland, 1985; Thornton & Wenger, 1988) In brief, there appears to be little dispute that, in general, social studies curriculum is textbook-based and instruction is teacher-dominated.

Although this would suggest uniform curriculum, recent research casts some doubt on whether the surface-level appearances of social studies classrooms--textbook-based curriculum from the fourth-grade up and teacher-domination--may mask greater curricular-instructional variety than has been thought. For example, Cornbleth (1985) reported a study of nine middle school teachers that "found none of the teachers relied on or even followed a single textbook." (p. 35) Furthermore, Susan Stodolsky (1988), in a study of 22 fifth-grade social studies classrooms, concluded that there were considerable differences in both subject matter and instructional arrangements across classrooms. And, in a recent review of research on teaching and learning history, Matthew Downey and Linda Levstik (1988) argued that "the conventional wisdom that textbooks dominate teaching and learning history" is open to question. (p. 337)

The findings of Cornbleth, Stodolsky, and Downey and Levstik provide additional evidence concerning how teachers act as gatekeepers. What seems more interesting about their findings, however, is that in areas such as textbook usage and instructional arrangements, gatekeeping appears to vary from teacher to teacher more than has been assumed. It is one thing to claim that a classroom is teacher-dominated; it is quite another matter to understand what teacher-domination means in a particular setting (see Wineburg & Wilson, in press). Understanding how teachers keep the gate may, then, entail a classroom-by-classroom examination.

Implications for Social Studies Curriculum and Instruction

In this paper, I have argued that the teacher should be understood as a gatekeeper for curriculum and instruction in social studies. Gatekeeping, in turn, is a product of the frame of reference the teacher brings to it.

Moreover, it is clear that gatekeeping is ecological in character--that is, each element of gatekeeping is part of an interactive system of beliefs and contextual factors that must be understood as a whole. (see, Shaver, Davis & Helburn, 1980, pp. 12-13) The ecological character of gatekeeping goes a long way toward explaining why periodic attempts at social studies reform, such as the implementation of a new curriculum in isolation from other factors, seldom succeed.

If social studies aspirations such as critical thinking are to be implemented in practice, there is no serious debate that the teacher is the key. Attempts to circumvent teachers through "teacherproof" curriculum and prescriptive models of instruction are doomed to failure. Rather than circumvent teachers, it seems of central importance to raise the consciousness of teachers about their gatekeeping. Much research is still needed, however, and even widespread appreciation of the significance of gatekeeping would be a major step forward for the social studies research community.

Notes

1. Frame of reference, as Shaver (1987) has observed, is similar to concepts such as "personal perspective," "personal theory," and "implicit theory" that have been used in teacher thinking research. (see, Clark & Yinger, 1979, pp. 251, 259; McCutcheon, 1981) Indeed, the proliferation of terms used to describe similar concepts is one of the difficulties in reviewing research relevant to gatekeeping.
2. The term gatekeeping has been used by others. (e.g., Erickson, 1975) Although the term has been used to describe somewhat different phenomena, all usages appear to center around a decision-making process.

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